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ABSTRACT

The Education Commission of the States' (ECS) survey of state initiatives for at-risk youth was conducted during 1987. The goal was to identify programs and planning efforts in the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the 3 ECS member territories addressing needs of at-risk youth from preschool through high school. Descriptions of over 650 programs, task forces, and other state initiatives for at-risk youth were collected. The survey identified 190 programs directly related to dropout prevention in 46 states. Most of these programs have been implemented since 1983; others were finalized and implemented in 1986. States are responding to the school dropout problem by either adding programs tailored to specific problems, needs, and community resources; or systematically changing the way services are provided. The strategies states choose to respond to the problem reflect two points of view: either the child is viewed as deficient or the system is viewed as deficient. The first point of view results in a safety net design while the second results in attempts to build flexible broad-based programs. Ten strategies appear frequently: (1) definition and identification; (2) networks; (3) academic support; (4) special curricula; (5) incentives and rewards; (6) counseling; (7) school policy changes; (8) alternative schools; (9) restructuring; and (10) comprehensive state plans. Typically a state employs 5 of these 10 strategies. Outlines of each strategy and the states that use it are included, as are issues and questions emerging from the survey. (ALL)

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The ECS Survey of State Initiatives for Youth At Risk

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DROPOUT PREVENTION

by Lucie Isenhart and Sue Bechard

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The Problem

National dropout statistics reveal some startling facts. The average public high school today loses nearly 25% of its potential graduates. In some districts in the country, 60% of high school age youngsters have dropped out. Among certain minority groups, the percentage of dropouts in certain districts has reached as high as 80%. The range of dropout percentages for individual states is between 11% and 44% (National Education Association, 1985).

States are responding to the problem of school dropouts in one of two ways.

- By far the most common type is the add-on program, tailored to specific problems, needs and community resources.
- The second, usually in pilot-project status, involves a systemic change in the way services are provided. It is fueled by the belief that structures which work most effectively for at-risk children will benefit all children.

At the heart of the choice between these two strategies are the definitions, identification processes and the attitudes surrounding the child at risk. The choice becomes more complex as states attempt to define who is at risk of dropping out of

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school and how they should respond. The difficulty lies in pinpointing a precise set of circumstances that lead a student to drop out of school. (The issues of substance abuse, teen pregnancy and family concerns represent very clear factors contributing to dropout rates and will be considered in separate papers.) The strategies states choose in responding to the problem of dropouts generally reflect one of two points of view:

- The "child-as-deficient "view results in a "safety-net" design. Once symptoms become obvious and gaps are located, programs are designed to combat the deficiency.

- The "system-as-deficient" view results in attempts to build flexible, broad-based edifices with bridges to other services, resources and concerned individuals, so that caring communities can provide security and success for all children.

State Responses

The survey identified 190 programs directly related to dropout prevention. Forty-six states have addressed the issue of dropout prevention, using a combination of research and practical experience to design their programs. Most of the programs are recent (within the last four to five years), and many are just now being finalized and implemented.

Ten strategies appear most frequently — definition and identification, networks, academic support, special curricula, incentives and rewards, counseling, school policy changes, alternative schools; restructuring and comprehensive state plans. Typically, a state employs 5 of these 10 strategies.

Definition and Identification

Determining who is at risk of dropping out of school precedes all program planning. Students who are behind a grade level in basic skills, truants, over-age students, those with discipline problems, criminal justice offenders, substance abusers, teenage mothers and their children, second-language learners, those with emotional or physical disabilities, those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds fall within state and community definitions of "potential dropout." Because there is a wide range of definitions and because these definitions determine state programming, it is important to examine the ways in which dropouts are defined.

Many states have legislated definitions for potential dropout, dropout, high-risk student and student at risk.

- **Florida,** for example, has mandated these definitions to determine program structure. All programs must serve students "at risk"; components of the program such as dropout retrieval, substance abuse and teen pregnancy help to elaborate the state's definition.

Interagency definitions result when different state agencies try to come up with unified definitions.

- **Texas's** definition of dropouts was created by the 10 state agencies that form the Interagency Council on Dropout Prevention.

- **Montana** is one of several states that created a new department to coordinate state agencies to define "dropout" and to identify state resources.

State agencies often create individual definitions for specific at-risk concerns.

- **Arizona's** state department mandated chemical-abuse prevention definitions and policies.

- **Illinois'** state department defined chronic truant and dropout.

- Often, the department's definition is included in the program description, such as **Michigan's** Hispanic dropout prevention program.

Statewide definitions are often an integral part of program goals. With the development of statewide computer systems and standardized data collection systems, statewide statistics are used to define dropouts in many states.

- **Florida's** mandated program requires all districts to collect data and submit information on dropouts to the state. Using this data, the state will create a common statewide definition.

- **Delaware's** program also aims at developing an improved statewide definition of dropouts.

Local agency and local school district definitions also define potential dropouts.

- Some states require that local definitions be a component of local programs (e.g., **Texas** and **Connecticut**).

- Others recommend that their definitions be part of local programs (e.g., **Arizona** and **Ohio**); the emphasis is to have local districts come up with definitions appropriate to their community.

Once dropouts are defined, there is the question of how they are identified and served.

States identify dropouts in several ways.

- State level. The state identifies schools with the greatest need — **Connecticut**, for example, created its own state formula for dropout identification.

- Local level. **Arkansas'** Project Spark trained all new elementary school counselors to identify at-risk youth and the available local programs and resources.

- Specialists. Many states, including **Florida** and **Texas**, have specialists trained to help state and/or local programs identify dropouts.

- Resource manuals, clearinghouses. States and communities have developed resource manuals and clearinghouses to provide information on identifying potential dropouts

and providing for their needs. **Michigan** surveyed students who dropped out and compiled a manual on needs and characteristics of dropouts.

Networks

More than three-quarters of the programs considered in this paper were involved in some sort of collaborative effort to prevent dropping out. Generally, collaboration was sought to use resources better and to enhance program effectiveness.

Common networking efforts include:

- **Texas** has coordinated 10 agencies to form the Interagency Council on Dropout Prevention. **Alaska, Arkansas** and **Washington** also pooled agency resources in at-risk efforts.

- Local networking efforts include school-based networks, involving administrators, teachers, counselors, students and families (as in **Massachusetts**); community partnerships involving local agencies, community members, business representatives and students (as in **Virginia** and **Nevada**); and multifaceted local networks coordinating school and community resources (**Delaware's** Project Team and **Hawaii's** Parent/Community Networking Centers).

- Mentorships between students and business people can be found in **California, Washington, Texas** and **Oregon.** Partnerships that involve collaboration between institutions of higher education and public school districts are found in states such as **New York, Hawaii** and **Michigan** where, for example, high-risk students are paired with college students studying education or psychology.

- Many state agencies mandate the establishment of multifaceted local networks, such as in **Arkansas** where the state department of education requires the creation of local teams to include education personnel and community representatives. Some states provide specialists to assist with local coordination and to help identify services and resources. In **California,** for example, the department of education identifies high schools with the highest dropout rates which in turn must coordinate school clusters to include the selected high school, a junior high school and two elementary schools. A state coordinator is assigned to each cluster.

- Interagency/local networks link multiple state agencies, schools and communities. **In North Carolina,** collaboration involves different state departments, school district personnel and community members.

Academic Support

A variety of strategies are in use that aim to make students more successful academically and thus reduce the rejection they experience when they fail to meet the demands of the system. These efforts begin as early as preschool and continue through higher education. Prevention of academic failure and intervention through remediation are the primary goals.

Prevention strategies:

- Academic readiness is accomplished by preschool programs that often include a parent-education component, as in **Arkansas'** HIPPY program (Home Instruction Program for Preschool Children).

- English as a Second Language (ESL) classes are provided to all levels of students. **Connecticut's** summer school program serves K-8 students; **Alaska** and **Iowa** have Adult Basic Education programs with ESL classes for 16-year-olds and over.

- **Arizona** reduces class size through a Special Academic Assistant program which provides extra funds for all K-3 students. **Florida** targets the 4th and 5th grades, while the **Boston Compact** clusters 9th graders with teacher teams.

- Other techniques instituted to help all children achieve include competency programs and mastery learning strategies, as in **Maryland's** Project Basic. Every student is assessed in every grade to assure minimum competencies have been achieved.

Intervention strategies:

- Supplemental literacy programs that specifically target disadvantaged youth are in place in many states. Among them are **Ohio's** Disadvantaged Pupil Program and **Washington's** Learning Assistance Program.

- Basic skills remediation is by far one of the most popular strategies reported. The areas covered most frequently were reading, writing and arithmetic, although **Rhode Island** includes speaking and listening. Tutors, peer tutors, summer school, Saturday school, after-school programs and supervised study sessions are common methods used to reach the students. **Alaska's** tutors make home visits by boat. **Michigan** maintains a Basic Skills Hotline for information and referrals statewide. **Iowa** requires mandatory academic testing and remediation for 16- to 25-year-olds who have three offenses for drug and alcohol abuse.

- Because an increasing number of states require competency testing for high school diplomas, a number of programs provide competency test assistance. **Mississippi's** Remediation Program is one example.

Special Curricula

Curricula have been designed by many states to cover topics not traditionally included in the regular instructional plan. Various topics are geared for special populations or particular age groups who are at risk and may be delivered by a variety of providers in myriad settings.

- Substance-abuse prevention is a long-standing special-curriculum topic that has been revived and upgraded under the federal Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act. Many states have taken advantage of these funds.

- Suicide prevention is a newer area of concern. **Michigan** uses special curricula along with peer counseling to address this issue.

- Positive life skills are the goals of **Utah's** comprehensive prevention program, as well as **Wisconsin's.** In **Washington,** trained specialists teach "generic" prevention skills, and **Texas** includes a life-skills curriculum as well.

- AIDS education has recently been legislated in **Illinois** under its Comprehensive Health Education Act.

- Sex education is included in the health curricula of many states, **Rhode Island** among them. **Michigan** covers 10 areas of health topics designed by an interagency team.

- Self-awareness courses are included in **Nevada's** junior high schools, as well as in some **Florida** middle schools.

- Adventure/outdoor education is offered by **New Hampshire's** YMCA to encourage at-risk youth to participate in basic skills programs.

- Peer counseling training is offered for credit in **South Dakota.**

- A Life Roles curriculum is used with juveniles in **Connecticut** institutions.

- Computer training and programs are used in many educational institutions, including those in **Idaho.**

- Vocational education is probably the largest area of special curricula and is offered to a variety of target populations. Combined with basic skills instruction or work skills and on-the-job training, it is used to serve dropouts and potential dropouts, teenage parents and handicapped youth.

- Special education was not specifically investigated by this survey, although obviously it affects at-risk youth and assists them in their efforts to graduate.

Incentives and Rewards

In an effort to keep potential dropouts from leaving school, many states have provided incentives to students. Many agree that personal development and building self-esteem are foundations of achievement; with this in mind, some states have developed programs with tangible rewards.

- **Michigan** and **New Jersey** have state programs that coordinate business community efforts to guarantee jobs to at-risk students who graduate from high school.

- Many programs involve job training as an incentive. State programs that have a vocational education component and teach potential dropouts how to find and keep a job are found in at least 13 states.

- Some state and local programs offer a greater range of services to students to encourage them to finish school. For example, **North Carolina** expands school services to include career-learning centers, day-care centers, substance-abuse rehabilitation and family counseling services. **Washington** guarantees day care for teenage mothers to encourage them to remain in school.

- **West Virginia** and the **District of Columbia** have programs that reward students with free recreational activities.

States provide different kinds of funding incentives to local districts to encourage programs for at-risk youth.

- In **Colorado** and **Virginia,** the state provides financial incentives for innovative local efforts to prevent substance abuse. In **Arkansas,** incentives will encourage local school districts to implement model programs. **Texas** offers financial incentives for creative funding models. And **Virginia** has built reward systems proportional to the reduction of dropout rates into its grant system.

Counseling

Schools have offered various counseling services for many years. Increasing counseling services to support students is a strategy being considered more frequently.

- Increased counselor training programs are evidence that many states see counseling as an important resource for potential dropouts. **Arkansas** has not only mandated counselor training for all new elementary school counselors, but also has increased the numbers of counselors in the schools.

- Matching counselors with students from high-risk backgrounds is one preventive strategy. In **Georgia,** students from migrant backgrounds are counseled on college campuses. **Michigan** has family counseling services that target high-risk family environments.

- Counseling to inform potential dropouts of alternatives includes such efforts as vocational counseling, as in **Wisconsin, West Virginia** and **Texas,** as well as pregnancy prevention efforts such as **Connecticut's.**

- Peer counseling also aids youngsters in choosing positive alternatives. Building self-esteem and coaching their peers on issues such as substance abuse, family violence and adolescent suicide are among the opportunities offered to young people in the **District of Columbia, Texas** and **Michigan.** Parents have also been called upon as counseling resources in **Delaware's** program.

- Many schools have increased teachers' roles to include counseling and advising. **North Carolina** seeks to sensitize all school staff to students' needs. In **West Virginia,** teachers counsel teachers.

- **Alaska** provides counseling **services to victims** of family violence and sexual assault.

School Policy Changes

Educational policies at all levels affect youth at risk. In particular, school policies can encourage or discourage a student and increase or decrease motivation for attending school and participating in the activities that schools offer.

- Attendance policies were the most frequently mentioned area of change, with in-school suspension the most recently initiated change. **North Carolina** and **Arkansas** support this with state funds.

- Parental notification of the students' absences is an effort to prevent attendance problems and to engage the parents' support when problems occur. **Washington, D.C.** (where parents are required to pick up their children's report cards) and **New York** have automatic dial phones to relieve the secretaries of this task. **Michigan** used mental health workers to make home visits to talk with parents of kindergarten and 1st graders.

- Graduation requirements have been increased in many states. Alternative programs in **Florida** can request modifications of a variety of curriculum mandates.

- Passing a state competency test for a diploma is required in 19 states. Remediation and retake opportunities are usually mandated by states with these policies.

- Eligibility policies are strictly enforced in all programs that deal with federal funds. **Nevada** has asked the U.S. Department of Labor for a waiver of the child-labor laws to allow 14- to 15-year-olds to hold jobs under a tightly controlled work/study program.

- Minimum-grade policies are often required for participation in extracurricular activities. These activities, such as sports, often have the most holding power for at-risk students. **Washington, D.C.,** pays its teachers to tutor students during nonteaching hours during the school day.

- **North Carolina** would like to see teacher certification policies changed to grant special endorsements to teachers who are qualified to teach at-risk children.

- Fifteen states have granted school-district status to their juvenile-justice and mental-health institutions. **Illinois** and **Connecticut** are two examples.

- **Florida** and **Illinois** have passed legislation to change the policies regarding student/parent welfare recipients to increase grant amounts while the student finishes her education.

Alternative Schools

Previously a wide-open and wild testing ground for educational innovation and social experimentation, alternative schools today have settled into more established patterns of operation. Through much trial and error, they have achieved a formula for success, which many at-risk students find appealing, and they have thus become havens for potential and retrieved dropouts. Their smaller size, informal atmosphere and emphasis on positive student/teacher relationships help students start over in a new and accepting setting.

The major issue in alternative education is the one of choice. Without the voluntary participation of parents, students and teachers alike, alternatives are at risk of becoming "soft jails."

- Task forces in **Kentucky, Alabama, Maine, Georgia, New Hampshire** and **Delaware** have recently suggested the development of alternative programs.

- The Kamehameha Schools in **Hawaii** have two out of four proposed alternative school models in place. One is a prevention model for the elementary grades.

- **Florida** reorganized its system to include alternatives as a special category for funding. **North Carolina's** new Dropout Prevention Program also supports the development of alternatives with special funding.

- **New York** provides entitlement funds for districts to set up alternatives.

- **Washington** has appointed a department of education liaison to the Washington Alternative Learning Association, which coordinates programs and updates an annual directory.

- In **California**, Alternative Education Work Centers for retrieved dropouts only emphasize a clinical, client-centered, individualized basic skills instruction in combination with vocational education and possible job placement.

- **Minnesota** has a voluntary program that allows all students within the participating districts to attend the schools of their choice.

- **Alabama** and **New Jersey** call for the development of alternatives for disruptive students.

- Magnet schools are often included in the category of alternatives, but were not included in this survey. The special segment of gifted and talented at-risk students are sometimes served by this strategy.

Restructuring

Restructured schools are the newest and the rarest single strategy used to keep kids in school. They are based on the visions of those who have been in the schools and have studied what works. They are efforts to combine all that is known about making school more successful for everyone.

In order to accomplish this, schools must be viewed as a whole entity, not as a collection of independent departments or classrooms. Essential shifting of roles and behaviors must take place to form that broader base and forge new relationships with the outside world. They must be purposeful and planned schools, their reasons for action springing from the day-to-day observations and experiences of those connected to them and from a growing, but often ignored, bank of educational and psychological research.

If there is a common element that restructured schools exhibit, it is a school-based decision-making process. It is supported by the philosophy that those who practice the art of teaching are the ones who need to create the learning environment and activities for the singularly individual group of students in their building.

One-quarter of the states reported experiments with this strategy. Those taking the first steps in restructuring schools will be watched closely:

- **Hawaii's** Project on Children and Youth At Risk is working with the University of Hawaii to develop restructured schools along the lines of John Goodlad's Partnership

for Educational Renewal approach. The project will serve students K-12. Funding from foundations is being sought to support this effort, along with in-kind resources from the schools involved.

- The School Effectiveness Unit has been established in **Connecticut's** Department of Education to act as a resource and to provide assistance to schools that voluntarily decide to initiate long-term changes. The project is geared to help individual schools, and the data gathered are not used by the district for evaluation purposes.

- School Improvement Councils can be organized in **Massachusetts** schools. These are school-based decision-making groups that include parents, students and teachers. Once in place, the councils can apply for state funds to evaluate their situation and make improvements.

Comprehensive State Plans

Most states have a variety of programs designed to meet the diverse needs of their dropout population. One-fourth of the states, however, have unified their programs under one state plan. These umbrella plans consist of four basic types:

- Mandated statewide participation legislation is in place in **West Virginia, Texas** and **Arkansas.** Arkansas is providing funds to increase elementary counselors and staff development. **Texas** is encouraging models that use creative funding.

- Statewide eligibility for program implementation is available in **Florida, Iowa, Alabama, North Carolina** and **Arizona.** Arizona districts are allowed to increase local revenues to support the programs. North Carolina funds a dropout prevention coordinator, an in-school suspension program and a district-designed program in all districts. Iowa districts can increase their tax bases, and Florida offers both entitlement funds based on need and categorical funds based on competitive proposals.

- Selected districts are eligible in **New York, California, Connecticut** and **Washington.** Connecticut's formula allows 25 districts to receive entitlement funds for three years. Washington funds 60 programs. New York has 70 participating districts, and California has 50 that are eligible.

- Pilot programs are in place or being considered in **Delaware, Ohio, New Jersey, Massachusetts** and **Virginia.** Virginia is funding models with incentives for dropout-rate reductions. Massachusetts is developing models in Boston that include incentives for learning, attendance and academic achievement. New Jersey is targeting 3 districts to set up models of school renewal and 38 districts to try out specific components. Ohio will provide technical assistance to districts with programs that focus on their identified at-risk factors.

Conclusion

Three overriding issues emerge from the ECS survey.

- Since the problem is multi-dimensional, the solutions also need to be. Diverse student populations require different approaches.

- Changing behavior is a long-term process that is harder to accomplish the older a person gets. Yet it is more difficult to acquire funding for prevention programs because the need is not as visible as in crisis situations. Services tend to be concentrated at the secondary level.

- There are no pat answers for what works for dropouts. As states experiment with and learn more about different strategies, the holistic approach to solving the problem emerges as the most innovative and effective strategy.

Further exploration of the issues raises numerous questions for policy makers.

- Some program specialists feel that labeling is negative yet difficult to avoid, especially at the secondary level. How can programs target those who need services and yet avoid stereotyping their needs? What kinds of messages are given to at-risk students who are pulled out of regular programs?

- More agencies are collaborating to maximize resources. How can boundaries be blurred and "turfism" reduced so the learning environment can be expanded to encompass a richer continuum of services?

- Dropping out is not just an educational problem, but schools are given the responsibility of correcting it. Who is responsible for dropout prevention? What strategies are available to encourage people to work together? How can funding problems be solved?

- Many states have mandated policies intended to improve the educational achievement of their students. What are the consequences of these policies for the local district and for the students at risk of dropping out?

- If programs are not flexible, they can hurt those they were intended to help. How can the creativity necessary to deal with complex, unanticipated situations be cultivated and trusted?

- Many strategies require role changes of teachers. How are states supporting teachers in their increased responsibilities? What new roles can be provided by families and communities?

- In times of budgetary stress, the newest programs are often the first to go. How can strategies for dropout prevention be integrated without overburdening an already stretched system?

- Some people hold the attitude that school is not for everyone, nor should it try to be. Special efforts should not be made to hold students against their will, especially if they are over the age of compulsory attendance.

- With little agreement on what are the most important services to deliver in public education, should we try to define the goal of education more clearly? Would this help to increase effectiveness of services delivered to at-risk youth? Can statewide definitions and programs provide for the diverse needs of an entire state?

- Schools resist programs implemented from the "top down." What should the various levels of the education system do to ensure that services are efficient and appropriate?

- Many questions remain unanswered due to the lack of consistent and well-thought-out evaluation procedures. Which models hold the highest promise of success? Can they be replicated? How can successful strategies be modified to fit different combinations of needs and resources?

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The Education Commission of the States' survey of state initiatives for at-risk youth was conducted during the summer and fall of 1987, with the support of the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The goal was to identify programs and/or planning efforts in the 50 states, the District of Columbia and the three ECS member territories that address the needs of at-risk youth from preschool through high school. Not only were initiatives identified in the state departments of education, but also in other agencies such as human services, health or juvenile justice. Information on federal and local programs sometimes was acquired in the course of the survey, but the main focus was on state programs — especially those funded by state monies.

ECS began its survey by contacting deputy education superintendents through the Council of Chief State School Officers' network. A standardized set of questions was asked about the history, purpose and extent of the programs, task forces, etc. These initial telephone interviews elicited further contacts and interviews, which resulted in more than 750 interviews and descriptions of more than 650 programs, task forces and other types of state initiatives.

Limitations to this method of data collection need to be noted. Though every effort was made to identify and contact all program and task force leads, it is likely that the results fall short of this comprehensive goal because of time limitations and the nature of telephone interviews.

Survey summaries are available from the ECS Distribution Center, 1860 Lincoln Street, Suite 300, Denver, Colorado 80295, 303-830-3692. Cost is $2 each or six for $10.

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